DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 227 559 EA 015 481

TITLE	Looking In on Your School. A Workbook for Improving Public Education. Revised.
INSTITUTION	National PTA, Chicago, Ill.
PUB DATE	82
NOTE	36p.; Photographs will not reproduce well.
AVAILABLE FROM	Order Department, The National PTA, 700 North Rush Street, Chicago, IL 60611 ($3.00).
PUB TYPE	Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Elementary Secondary Education; Guidelines; Institutional Characteristics; *Institutional Evaluation; *Institutional Research; *Parent Participation; *Parent School Relationship; Program Evaluation; *Public Education; School Effectiveness

ABSTRACT

Prepared for parents, this handbook aims to help them study and assess their public schools. An introduction presents the reasons parents should gather information on their schools and discusses planning the project, organizing the group, and conducting the evaluation. Next, 13 qualities of an academically effective school are listed. Nine sections follow on different aspects of schools; each section lists questions to ask, gives space for answers, and suggests actions to take. The nine sections cover (1) school goals and objectives; (2) administration, including the principal, superintendent, and board; (3) teachers, involving training, effectiveness, satisfaction, salary, and personnel policies; (4) students; (5) curriculum, including English, mathematics, social studies, science, arts, health and physical education, life skills, and career or vocational education; (6) support services, such as testing, guidance and counseling, and education for the handicapped, gifted, and others with special needs; (7) the library, or media or learning center; (8) school plant and financing; and (9) parents and community. The last section discusses analysis of data and preparation of plans for improvement. A list of resources is appended. (RW)

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LOOKING IN ON YOUR SCHOOL

A WORKBOOK FOR IMPROVING PUBLIC EDUCATION

ED227559

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THE NATIONAL PTA

EA 015 481

Looking In on Your School was first issued by the National PTA in 1958, with periodic revisions since that date.
Draft material for this edition was prepared by Nancy Ethiel.

Photographs by Paul Conklin (cover);
Carol Bales (p. 4);
Paul Conklin (p. 7);
Roger W. Neal (p. 8); and
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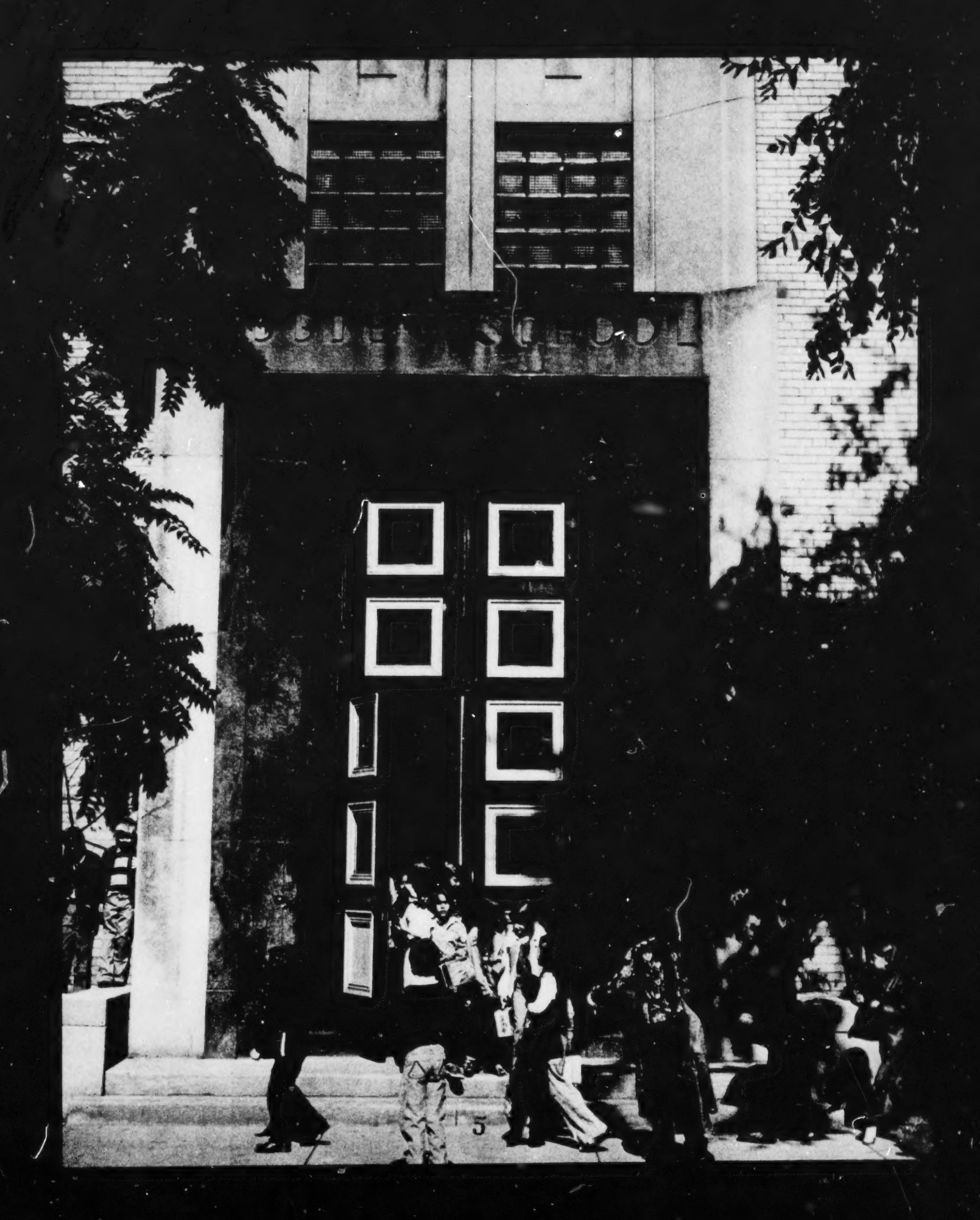

LOOKING IN ON YOUR SCHOOL

INTRODUCTION

For well over 100 years public education has been the cornerstone of America's greatness. Through our public school system, generations of students have learned to read, write, think and develop their talents; and millions of immigrants have been assimilated into American society. Today Americans are the best educated people in the world.

Still, America's public education system is under attack. Critics charge that declining test scores mean that Johnny can't read, that schools are unsafe and violent, and that the best and brightest students are fleeing to private schools, making public schools the dumping grounds for those who are less able, less fortunate, and less motivated.

Parents worry about whether their children are learning, whether their neighborhood school will be closed, what massive budget cuts will do to the quality of education today and tomorrow.

Few critics or parents really know what is going on in their local school. A couple of visits a year for school programs, plus one or two formal teacher-parent conferences, simply cannot give an adequate picture of the breadth and quality of education being provided in any one of the more than 80,000 public schools across our nation.

The National PTA, which has local units in more than 25,000 schools, believes that most of the charges against public schools are unfounded. The National PTA is convinced that public education is strong and that most public schools provide a quality education for our nation's youth.

Because of the recent attacks on the public schools, though, this may be a good time to evaluate our schools, both public and private, so that we can publicly applaud the strong points and build upon them, and isolate and improve the weaknesses.

In the 1980s, parents must become more involved in their children's education. That is why the National PTA is calling upon parents this year to look in on their local school—to study its operation; to determine its strengths and weaknesses; to join with administrators, teachers, and community members to improve their school in order to better the lives and futures of their children.

Evaluating and improving public education is a vital task. It is a task that can be accomplished best at the grassroots level, in each of our local schools. It is easy to become overwhelmed by the size of the effort, but remember—parents, individually and together, *can* make a difference.

FINDING THE FACTS

Before any action to improve public education can be taken, it is necessary to gather the facts. That is the purpose of this workbook. It is a tool to help you, along with other concerned citizens, discover what the situation really is in your local school building or school district. Once you are in possession of the facts, you can decide what, if anything, needs to be done.

Finding out the facts begins with a formal evaluation, suggestions for which are outlined here in the form of a checklist.

The evaluation may be carried out in several ways: as a local PTA project (working together as a group will shorten the time involved as well

as add the benefit of different views and ideas); as a project for several individuals, who may want to select only one portion of the checklist and leave other sections for a later time; or as an informal study of the school when a more formal evaluation is impractical or when certain areas obviously need immediate attention.

To achieve the best, most complete study of the quality of education provided in a school, however, a formal evaluation should be conducted by an active group of concerned and well-prepared parents, teachers, and other citizens, working through and with school administrators and board members.

PLANNING THE PROJECT AND ORGANIZING THE GROUP

The first step in improving your school is to call a planning meeting to discuss conducting an evaluation. The PTA president or the chairman of a PTA committee can issue an invitation for the meeting to the PTA members, principal, teachers, school board, students, and community at large. Additional copies of this workbook, for participants to use and keep, can be secured from the National PTA or your state PTA office.

Before the meeting date, the proposed project—its purpose and goals—should be discussed with the building principal and, if at all possible, with the school faculty and superintendent. Tell these educators about the positive results you expect to achieve, and impress upon them that you hope to work with them in identifying the strengths of the school as well as in improving any weaknesses. It would be helpful to give the principal a copy of this workbook to study and to keep as a reference.

Try to involve all parts of the community in the planning meeting. An evaluation can be truly effective only if it has the wholehearted cooperation and participation of parents, teachers, administrators, and students.

If those at the planning meeting agree on the need for an evaluation, the next step is to discuss the process for carrying out the work. Study the list of "Qualities of an Effective School" (p. 9). Go through the checklist (pp. 10-31) and decide which sections you wish to consider and any other areas you want to cover. Remember, the checklist is merely a guide to the areas to be covered and the kinds of questions to ask. You can adapt them to your special needs, or you may want to create your own checklist.

Note that many of the questions are worded so that a "yes" answer is the best answer. Generally, a "no" answer is a signal that you need to explore that area further. Many other questions have no "yes" or "no" answer. When dealing with such questions, you may have to ask additional questions to get the information you need.

After deciding which sections of the workbook you wish to use, find out who wants to take an active role in the evaluation. It may be helpful, too, to select a project leader or coordinator. Next, survey the interested group to see which participants have special expertise or interest in each area, and assign one or preferably more than one person to work on each section.

HOW THE EVALUATION WILL BE CONDUCTED

Now it is time to determine the way the evaluation process should be conducted. Discuss with the principal how to approach teachers and other school personnel. Since an evaluation often touches on sensitive areas, some people may feel uncomfortable at the prospect of being questioned or observed. Therefore it is necessary always to approach faculty, students, administrators, and other parents with a friendly and constructive attitude.

Determine how much time will be spent on the evaluation. Discuss with the principal which personnel and students will need to be contacted,

and arrange for appointments. The principal may wish you to contact the teachers and others directly, or to work through the school secretary. If it proves difficult to set up appointments with people you need to see, be polite but persistent.

Before adjourning the planning meeting, set up a reporting schedule and determine when additional meetings will be necessary. Also, give some thought to the form of report you wish to issue and what action you will take once you have completed the evaluation.

Inform your PTA council and possibly your state office that you are beginning an evaluation. They may be able to put you in touch with others in your area who are doing, or have done, similar evaluations. Meeting with these groups can result in a useful exchange of ideas.

Chamois

THE QUALITIES OF AN ACADEMICALLY EFFECTIVE SCHOOL

One of the difficulties of an evaluation such as this is in knowing what to look for and how to assess what you find.

Although it is impossible to determine with absolute precision the components that go into creating a good school, there is a growing body of research and agreement on the characteristics of an effective school. It will be helpful for you to keep these in mind during the evaluation process and to use them as a standard of measurement once the process is completed.*

An effective school:

1. Has clearly stated philosophy, expectations, and rules that are understood and accepted by students, staff, and parents and that are consistently applied to the entire school.
2. Has positive expectations of all pupils and believes that they have the ability to learn.
3. Emphasizes academics, with stress on reading, math, and communication skills.
4. Places a high value on individual student progress, and monitors this by means of a carefully devised evaluation program. Uses test results to pinpoint student strengths and weaknesses.
5. Has a strong principal with a vision of the school that can be understood and accepted by students, staff, and parents.
6. Has a principal who makes decisions in such a way that the views of students, staff, and parents are represented.
7. Has a principal who is an instructional leader, not only setting standards for instruction but acting as a resource in instructional matters.
8. Has teachers who recognize student accomplishment rather than concentrating on student failure.
9. Has a physical and emotional environment that is comfortable and pleasant.
10. Provides many opportunities for students to assume responsibility and participate in the operation of the school.
11. Is orderly, but not rigid, with clearly stated expectations.
12. Has an organization and staff that are open to change.
13. Has parents who are committed to learning and deeply involved with their children's education.

* These components are adapted from Gayle Dorman, *Middle Grades Assessment Program* (see Resources, page 34).

I Goals and Objectives of the School

(ask principal, superintendent)

In a good school, the school district has prepared a written statement of goals and objectives or philosophy. This statement makes provision for equal opportunity for students of all races, ethnic groups, religions, and both sexes.

QUESTIONS	RESPONSES
1. Does the school district have a written statement of its goals and objectives?	
2. Does the statement recognize and provide for individual differences in students' abilities and backgrounds?	
3. Does the statement contain explicit guarantees that equal opportunity will be provided for students of all races, religions, ethnic groups, and both sexes?	
4. Does the statement include provision for programs for students with special needs?	

Action suggestions: Study the written goals and objectives of the school. If they are inadequate, suggest concrete ways they can be improved. If there is no written statement, suggest that the school board appoint a committee of PTA members and other citizens to work with school board members, administrators, teachers, and students on preparing one.

II Administration

(principal, superintendent, school board)

Principal:

In a good school, the principal is the instructional and administrative leader. He or she establishes procedures for the operation of the building and is a resource in curriculum matters. The principal has positive expectations of students and a belief in their ability to learn. The principal is accessible to parents, teachers, and students, and encourages the involvement of all these groups in the school. In addition, the principal has a vision of what the school should be and the leadership ability to reach for this vision.

Principal (ask teachers, superintendent)

QUESTIONS	RESPONSES
1. Is the principal a strong and effective educational leader? Does the principal work closely and well with the students? Teachers? Parents?	
2. How often does the principal observe classroom instruction?	

Questions	Responses

3. Are parents involved and informed about decisions? Teachers? Students?
4. How does the principal encourage staff development?
5. How often are staff members evaluated? Do they have an opportunity to review their evaluations with the principal? How are they rewarded for excellent performances? How does the principal deal with inadequate performances?
6. Do students accept discipline? Is it effective? How frequently must students be disciplined for major infractions of the rules? Minor ones?
7. How are individual differences among students recognized and provided for?
8. What is the school doing to improve race relations? To promote racial equality? Equality between the sexes?
9. How are parents and community members involved in the life of the school?

Action suggestions: Outline for the principal how the involvement of parents and other citizens can benefit the school. Then suggest concrete ways in which parental participation can be encouraged. Ask the principal to keep parents informed of school decisions through reports at PTA meetings and articles in PTA and school newsletters.

Superintendent

In a good school, the superintendent's primary responsibility is to implement programs that will carry out goals and policies set by the school board as representatives of the community. As chief administrator for the school district, the superintendent is a strong leader and an effective manager of staff and resources. He or she implements policies in such a way that the community, staff, and students are informed and involved in the decision-making process.

Superintendent (ask superintendent, principal, school board members)

QUESTIONS	RESPONSES

1. What are the superintendent's short- and long-range plans for the district? How are parents involved in formulating these plans?

Questions	Responses

2. Does the district's budget adequately fund the educational program? Does the superintendent manage the budget efficiently? Is the superintendent knowledgeable about new and alternative sources of funding?
3. Are personnel policies adequate, fair, and clearly understood by all staff?
4. Is the enrollment in this school declining? Increasing? What are the enrollment projections for this school area over the next decade?
5. Are there plans or the possibility that the school may be closed in the next few years? If so, why? Where would the students go? How would the community be involved in such a decision?
6. Have other schools in the area been closed? Are there plans or the possibility that other schools will be closed and their students transferred to this school? If so, what plans are being made to absorb them? Would the school become overcrowded?
7. Does the superintendent regularly inform the community about what is going on in the schools? Is the superintendent accessible to PTA leaders? Other parents? Does he or she solicit parental and other views before decisions are made?

Action suggestions: If budget cuts are adversely affecting the quality of education, ask the superintendent and school board to discuss educational priorities and what can be done to increase funds for education. If declining enrollment is a problem in your area, perhaps the PTA could investigate various options used in other communities and present these to the board and superintendent with recommendations for your own community.

School Board

In a good school, the school board is the elected or appointed policy-making body for its school district. As representatives of the community, school boards operate openly, encouraging public attendance at meetings and keeping constituents informed.

School Board (ask school board members, community members, superintendent)

QUESTIONS	RESPONSES

1. Are school board members elected or appointed? What is their term? What qualifications are they required to have? Are all segments of the community represented by the board?
2. Are board meetings well publicized and open to the community? Are agendas published in advance? Are minutes available at the school building or local library? Does the PTA monitor all board meetings?
3. Are major policies passed only after all sides of the questions are aired?
4. Does the board regularly evaluate the superintendent and review the superintendent's evaluation of other administrators?
5. Do board members visit schools? Do they appear knowledgeable not only about local schools but about educational issues in general?
6. Does the board take an active role in budget planning and implementation? Does it monitor the efficiency with which the budget is administered?
7. How does the school board respond to community concerns? How does it solicit opinions? Is the public well represented at school board meetings?
8. Does the board use citizen advisory groups? How is the PTA involved?

Action suggestions: Most states have "sunshine" meeting laws requiring open school board meetings. If your board meetings are closed, urge open meetings. If meetings are open but not well attended, publicize meetings and encourage public attendance.

A PTA member should be present at all meetings and report to the local unit and council on all important decisions and debates. The PTA, as representatives of the parents, should make parents' views and concerns known to the board as well as to the superintendent and principal.

In addition, the PTA should encourage high-quality candidates to run for school board positions. It can hold candidate nights to publicize board elections and hear candidates' records and positions, but the PTA never supports or opposes individual candidates.

III Teachers

In a good school, teachers are well trained in their fields and meet all state standards for certification. They update their training on a regular basis, and the school district provides in-service training to assist them.

Good teachers are recognized and rewarded. Personnel policies and grievance procedures are fair, objective, and formalized in writing. Teachers have a voice in issues affecting their own careers and the future of the school.

Teachers will have very different personalities yet be equally effective if their primary concern is their students. Research indicates that effective teachers:

1. Believe that all students can learn, and help them to learn by diagnosing student abilities accurately, assigning appropriate tasks, holding students accountable, providing clear and immediate feedback, and evaluating student progress frequently.
2. Interact positively with students.
3. Are good managers, planning class activities in advance but remaining flexible.
4. Create situations in which students are successful.
5. Provide more structure and detailed instruction and interaction for younger students and those with problems while helping older, more able students to develop independence and responsibility for their own learning.
6. Are accessible to parents, providing comprehensive evaluations of student progress at regular intervals and notifying parents promptly of student achievements or problems.

Training (ask principal)

QUESTIONS	RESPONSES
1. Do all teachers meet state standards for certification?	
2. What percentage of teachers have advanced degrees? How are teachers encouraged to take further training? How are they rewarded for advanced study?	
3. Are any teachers teaching outside their fields of certification?	
4. What opportunities for in-service training are provided?	
5. How much teacher turnover is there each year? Are better trained teachers leaving or being attracted to the school? How many first-year teachers are employed?	

Personal Effectiveness (ask students and principal)

QUESTIONS	RESPONSES
1. Does the teacher seem to enjoy teaching? Is the teacher enthusiastic? Does the teacher have good rapport with the students?	
2. Is the teacher fair and impartial when dealing with all students?	
3. Does the teacher command the class's attention? Is the teacher a good communicator? A good listener? Are assignments clear and easy to understand?	
4. Does the teacher capitalize on student success and minimize failure, while making sure that students understand the reasons for their success or failure?	
5. Are classes well planned but flexible? Are distractions kept to a minimum?	
6. How does the teacher vary instruction for individual students? Does the teacher employ both individual and group instruction appropriately?	
7. Does the teacher recognize and encourage boys and girls equally? Members of minority groups?	
8. Does the teacher schedule formal and informal conferences to keep parents informed about their child's progress?	
9. How does the teacher draw on community resources? Encourage students to seek knowledge outside the classroom?	

Teacher Satisfaction (ask teachers)

QUESTIONS	RESPONSES
1. Do you enjoy teaching in this school? Why and why not? How are your contributions recognized?	
2. Is there a high rate of teacher turnover in this school? Are good teachers leaving or being attracted to the school? Why do teachers leave?	

Questions	Responses

3. How good is discipline in the school? Do you feel safe in school? Coming to school?
4. How does the principal support you?
5. Do you attend school board meetings? PTA meetings?
6. How can your PTA help you?

Salary and Personnel Policies (ask principal, superintendent)

QUESTIONS	RESPONSES

1. How do teachers' salaries compare with other salaries in the area for work requiring comparable experience and education?
2. What is the student-teacher ratio?
3. Are there written personnel policies? Clearly stated grievance procedures? Is there a written agreement between the school and the teachers' union or association? Have there been strikes? Who is involved in teacher contract negotiations?
4. How are teachers evaluated?
5. How are exceptionally able teachers recognized and rewarded? What methods does the school have for dealing with incompetent teachers?
6. What voice do teachers have in decision-making?
7. How are teachers encouraged to share their knowledge and expertise with the community?

Action suggestions: The PTA should express strongly its belief that well-trained, adequately compensated, caring teachers are the foundation of all good schools. If teachers' salaries are too low or student-teacher ratios are too high, the PTA can work for salary increases, the hiring of more teachers, or nonmonetary ways of rewarding good teachers.

If teacher turnover is a problem, the PTA can study ways to retain good teachers. The PTA can recruit volunteers to help teachers in the classroom with specialized tutoring, projects, or other activities.

While the PTA remains neutral in all disputes and negotiations, it can offer its services as a forum so that both sides can present their positions and concerns.

IV Students

In a good school, learning is accomplished in an atmosphere of high expectations and respect for the individual. Discipline is good. In order to foster good discipline, the school has a written policy detailing the rights and responsibilities of students and the steps that will be taken if self-discipline fails.

(ask students)

QUESTIONS	RESPONSES
1. Do you enjoy coming to school most of the time?	
2. Can you get help from teachers if you need it? Do your teachers encourage you?	
3. Does the principal know who you are? Can you go to the principal if you have a major problem?	
4. Are students treated fairly and impartially? Are students of different races and ethnic groups treated the same?	
5. Are your classes challenging? Too hard? Too easy?	
6. is homework regularly assigned? Do your parents routinely supervise the preparation of assignments?	
7. Is the conduct of students in the school good? Is discipline too lax? Too severe? Do you understand the rules? Do you feel they are fair?	
8. Is there a teacher here you feel you can confide in? Counselor? Other person?	
9. Is there a problem with drug or alcohol abuse in this school? What actions are being taken to prevent or combat this problem?	
10. Is there a problem with smoking at the school?	

(ask teachers and principal)

QUESTIONS	RESPONSES
1. Does the school have a written policy describing the rights and responsibilities of students?	

Questions	Responses

2. Are the rules known and understood by students, staff, and parents? Is due process carefully observed in all disciplinary matters?
3. Do students have a voice in rule-making? In recommending disciplinary procedures? In recommending courses or activities?
4. What strategies (counseling, positive reinforcement, behavior modification, school-wide problem-solving task forces, etc.) besides punishment are used for rule breakers?
5. How many incidents of violence and vandalism have been reported in the last year? Have incidents been increasing? Decreasing?
6. Do students and staff fear for their safety at school?
7. Is there a problem with drug and alcohol abuse in the school? What action is being taken to prevent or combat these problems?
8. Is smoking a problem? What are the rules and regulations regarding smoking?
9. How are parents notified and involved when rule violations occur?
10. What is the school's absenteeism rate? What is being done to lower it? To follow up on absences? What is the policy on making up missed work?
11. Are the rights of students with regard to religious freedom, freedom of speech and assembly, and other forms of expression respected?
12. Are parents allowed access to their children's school records?
13. What does the school do to promote racial understanding and improved race relations?
14. Is sexual equality a part of school policy? Are classes open to all students regardless of sex?

Questions	Responses

15. Do most students appear to be happy and to like attending this school?
16. Is there a high dropout rate? What is being done to encourage students to stay in school?
17. What extracurricular activities are available to help students explore careers and hobbies? Clubs? Sports? Others?

Action suggestions: If there is no written policy of students' rights and responsibilities, suggest that one be drafted and that students participate in the drafting. If homework is not regularly assigned, or if some children need special help, the PTA could undertake a study of homework, including the possible establishment of a homework project to assist students and their parents.

If vandalism or violence is occurring or students seem alienated, suggest to the principal that the PTA set up a task force to address these issues, drawing on parents, students, school staff, and other interested citizens. If alcohol and drug abuse are problems, recommend establishing a community program to attack these problems. If discipline is a major problem, study the results of the National PTA Discipline Project. Finally, recognize and reward positive achievements of the students.

V Curriculum

In a good school, the curriculum includes both core academic subjects and arts and life skill classes. Reading and writing are emphasized in all subjects, not just in English class. Scheduling is flexible. Student grouping is based on such factors as ability, productivity, maturity, and interest, and is flexible and open to change. Students with special needs (such as the learning disabled; handicapped, or gifted) are provided for within their own school system if at all possible. The curriculums for elementary, middle, junior high school, and high school are coordinated and regularly reviewed.

(ask principal, teachers in each subject area)

QUESTIONS	RESPONSES

1. Who chooses textbooks for the school? The school board? Superintendent? Principals? State selection committee? Teacher? Local committee?
2. How are textbooks chosen? Is there a written policy for selecting or challenging instructional materials? Is there PTA/parent input?
3. Are textbooks and other instructional materials regularly reviewed and updated?

Questions	Responses
4. How often is the curriculum reviewed? Who participates in reviews? Are students and parents included? When was the last review? When will the next one be held?	
5. Are students required to have mastered specific skills in the various areas before being promoted to a higher grade?	

English

QUESTIONS	RESPONSES
1. Is English required throughout the grades and for at least three years in high school?	
2. Are reading and writing emphasized in all subject areas?	
3. Can students comprehend, interpret, discuss, and write critically about what they read?	
4. Are the communication skills of listening and speaking emphasized?	
5. Is reading for pleasure emphasized? Is time allotted for this during the school day?	
6. Is literature from other cultures and periods a part of the curriculum?	

Mathematics

QUESTIONS	RESPONSES
1. Is the mathematics curriculum organized around problem solving?	
2. Does it teach the following skills: Estimation? Approximation? Measurement? Prediction? Reading, interpreting, and construction of tables, charts, and graphs? Computer and calculator literacy?	
3. Do all students have access to calculators and computers? Is their use integrated into the curriculum?	
4. If the school has no programs in computer literacy, are such programs planned for the near future? What else is being done to prepare students for life in a computerized society?	

Social Studies

QUESTIONS	RESPONSES
1. Does the social studies curriculum include economics, political science, sociology, anthropology, consumer and environmental education, history, and geography?	
2. Are students taught about a variety of cultures? About local history? About the contributions of minorities and women?	
3. Are students taught map and graph skills? Research skills? To interpret, analyze, and challenge? To make critical judgments and defend them? To understand the nature of social change?	
4. Since social studies often deals with controversial subjects, what safeguards does the school system provide so these subjects are fairly and adequately presented to students?	

Science

QUESTIONS	RESPONSES
1. Is the scientific content of the curriculum current? Are materials clear and straightforward? Understandable to students?	
2. Are students taught underlying principles and concepts of science and scientific thinking?	
3. How much time is devoted to lab work? Are labs well equipped? Of adequate size?	
4. Are chemicals stored, used, and disposed of safely?	

Arts

QUESTIONS	RESPONSES
1. Are art, music, and drama a part of the regular curriculum for all children? Are programs adequately funded and staffed?	
2. Is the emphasis on self-expression? Mastery of basic techniques?	
3. Are the arts of other cultures and times taught?	

Questions	Responses

4. How are resident artists or volunteers in the arts used?
5. Does the school participate in the National PTA Reflections Project?

Health and Physical Education

QUESTIONS	RESPONSES

1. How are nutrition, sex, drug, alcohol, and smoking education included in the curriculum?
2. Do physical education classes emphasize basic skills, coordination, physical fitness, and noncompetitive sports?
3. Is there equal emphasis and budget for boys' and girls' sports?
4. Are physical education instructors and coaches adequately trained in safety procedures? Have there been serious sports-related injuries in the last year? What is being done to prevent injuries?

Life Skills, Career or Vocational Education

QUESTIONS	RESPONSES

1. Is training in television viewing skills a part of the curriculum? Are students being taught to become discriminating media viewers?
2. Is the emphasis on acquiring basic, transferable skills rather than on training for specific jobs?
3. What percentage of high school students drop out before graduation? What programs provide career and vocational training for dropout-prone youth? For students returning to school?

Action suggestions: Ask to see a copy of the curriculum in each subject area. If there are areas in which the school appears weak, explore ways the PTA can strengthen these areas. Parents, through their PTA, may have to take the initiative in supporting computer education and in insisting that all students have access to this new technology. Study the National PTA's TV Viewing Skills Project to see how a viewing skills program can be implemented in your school. Explore ways to expand career and vocational education programs.

VI Support Services

(special education, guidance and counseling, testing)

Education for the Handicapped, the Gifted, and Others with Special Needs

In a good school, a free, appropriate education is provided for all handicapped children, as required by federal and state law. Screening, diagnostic testing, and evaluation are provided as well as instruction. Parents are informed and consulted at each stage of this process. To the degree that it is possible, handicapped children are educated within the system. Gifted children are provided with challenging educational opportunities that allow them to make the best possible use of their special abilities.

Special Education (ask: superintendent, principal, special education staff)

QUESTIONS	RESPONSES
1. What services are provided for handicapped children? How are parents informed and involved with the required individual educational programs?	
2. What special screening and educational programs are available for preschool-age children?	
3. Are facilities, staff, and budget adequate for students' special education needs? Is the school equipped for physical access by the handicapped? Are there ramps? Elevators? Accessible rest rooms?	
4. Are handicapped and non-handicapped children given a chance to be together?	
5. What programs and facilities are provided for children whose needs cannot be met within the school system?	
6. What special programs or classes are available for the gifted? How are students chosen for these programs? Are staff and budget adequate? Do teachers have special training for dealing with the gifted?	
7. What compensatory education programs are available for disadvantaged students? For non-English-speaking students?	

Action suggestions: Find out whether special education programs are in complete compliance with federal and state laws. If not, work for the addition of necessary programs, staff, or equipment. If there is little contact

between handicapped and nonhandicapped students, the PTA can set up an extracurricular program for them. If there are no programs for the gifted, discuss with administrators how such programs can be established. Recruit volunteers for one-on-one tutoring and enrichment programs for students with special needs.

Guidance and Counseling

In a good school, guidance and counseling are available for all children. Counseling is provided by a counselor, psychologist, or social worker who is either a full- or part-time school employee. Vocational and college guidance are coordinated with the curriculum and students' course selections. The guidance counselor is aware of changing job markets and the skills that are needed to help students get and keep jobs. The college counselor is able to match students with suitable colleges and is well versed in funding sources.

Guidance and Counseling (ask principal, guidance counselors, psychologist, social worker, teachers, and students)

QUESTIONS	RESPONSES
1. Is there an adequate number of guidance and vocational counselors? Social workers? Is there a school psychologist or psychiatrist full-time or on a consulting basis? Are all these workers fully certified?	
2. Is the guidance program available for all students? Does it focus on self-understanding and personal development?	
3. Is the guidance counselor knowledgeable about career fields?	
4. What resources are provided for students to learn about college and careers?	
5. How many students who do not go to college find jobs within six months after graduation? How many go on to college?	
6. Does the high school prepare all students either to enter college or to find a job upon graduation?	
7. How are students with problems identified for referral to specialists? How are parents involved in this process?	

Action suggestions: If budget cuts threaten or limit guidance and counseling services, reaffirm the need for such services. Offer to recruit professional volunteers from the community. A good PTA project might be to collect and analyze information on what happens to students after leaving high school. The PTA can develop a career resource center and plan career nights. It can also work with local business and industry to develop work-study programs, internships, or "hands-on" experiences for youth.

Testing

In a good school, testing is used to improve the individual child's learning and the quality of the general curriculum. Testing is recognized as only one part of the process of measuring an individual's academic and intellectual growth. Test scores and their interpretations should be available to parents. It should be remembered, though, that no one test is a fair judge of a student's progress or a permanent indicator of ability. Test scores should always be considered along with other factors such as classwork, teacher's evaluation of the child's abilities, and parents' knowledge of the child's talents and interests.

Testing (ask principal, teachers, parents, students)

QUESTIONS	RESPONSES
1. What types of tests are used in the school? What tests are required by the state? What are tests expected to accomplish?	
2. Is student evaluation based on a variety of measurements, of which tests are just one?	
3. How are test scores used in a positive manner to improve student learning? To diagnose student needs? How are curriculum and teaching adjusted to reflect test results?	
4. Does the school notify parents in advance of test schedules and provide them with results? Are scores adequately interpreted and explained?	
5. If tests diagnose a student problem or need, what is the follow-up?	

Action suggestions: Ask for a summary sheet explaining the types of tests used each year at the school and what they are expected to accomplish. If there is no such outline, the PTA can offer to undertake the project of preparing one. If interpreted test scores are not available to parents, request that they be made available.

Arrange a PTA program to inform members and the public about testing. A very useful program might be a panel discussion and question-and-answer session that includes a school testing specialist, a classroom teacher, a parent, and a student. You may want to publish results of the meeting in your PTA bulletin to help parents frame appropriate questions about their child's achievement, progress, and potential to use in parent-teacher conferences.

VII The Library/Media or Learning Center

In a good school, the library provides adequate reference materials for all courses and appropriate resources for students with special needs or interests. It also covers a broad range of topics and represents various points of view. The library is comfortable and easily accessible, and the librarians well trained and certified.

The library has a written policy describing how all materials are to be selected. In addition, procedures for handling challenges to material are clearly defined and carefully carried out so that the rights of all people are protected. While librarians take into account community attitudes and standards, they are equally concerned about students' right to read a wide range of material.

The Library (ask principal, librarians, school board, teachers, students)

QUESTIONS	RESPONSES
1. Does the school have a library/media or learning center? If not, what access do students have to a library? Is it adequate and appropriate to their needs?	
2. Is a wide range of material available? Are books and other reference materials adequate and appropriate to support the curriculum? Are they up to date?	
3. Are funds adequate to keep the library current and well equipped? Are funds increasing? Decreasing?	
4. Do the materials represent the ethnic pluralism of American society? Women, and their contributions? Other times, places, and points of view?	
5. How many librarians are there? Are they certified?	
6. Is there a written policy for selection of books and materials? Is it carefully followed? Who makes the selection?	
7. Is there a written policy for handling complaints about material in the library? If so, what is the policy? Are materials kept on the shelves while the complaint process is carried out?	
8. Have there been formal complaints or challenges to library material? Has any material been removed as a result of complaints? If so, what? Why?	

Action suggestions: If the quality and quantity of library materials are inadequate and funds for additions and replacements are insufficient, hold discussions on how to raise funds. If the size of the library staff is inadequate, request more staff and/or recruit parents or other volunteers in the community to assist staff. If there is no written policy for selection and retention of material, offer assistance in drafting one. If there have been complaints about materials in your school's library, the PTA can help school librarians educate the community about First Amendment rights and the importance of exposing students to different points of view.

VIII School Plant and Financing

In a good school, the school is well maintained, clean, and attractive, regardless of the age of the building, with no safety or health hazards. It is warm and welcoming to students, staff, and community. Adequate funding from local, state, and national sources is available to meet the needs of students and teachers.

School Plant (ask principal, teachers, custodians, school board; observe)

QUESTIONS	RESPONSES
1. Does the school building meet all requirements of state and local building, fire, and safety codes? When was it last inspected? By whom? What was the evaluation? How often is it inspected? Have any violations been found in the last two years? If so, what were the violations and what has been done to correct them?	
2. Is the school in good repair? Well maintained and attractive? Are the grounds neat? Well planned? Are the rest rooms and locker rooms adequate and clean?	
3. What is the school's record for safety? Have there been incidents of student injury during the last year? If so, what were the causes of injury and what action has been taken to prevent further injury?	
4. Are there any safety or health hazards? Are there any plans to improve safety at the school? Is there a student accident insurance plan?	
5. Is there a full-time school nurse on duty at the school? What are the procedures in case of a major injury? Are there fire	

Questions	Responses

and other disaster plans? How often are fire and other disaster drills held?

6. Was asbestos, an identified health hazard, used in the construction of this school? Has the school been inspected for asbestos? If asbestos has been found, what are the plans for removal?
7. Were any other materials that present health hazards used in construction?
8. Is the general neighborhood of the school safe? Are there safety, traffic, or health hazards? If so, what is being done to correct them?
9. Are there adequate and safe recreation areas? Good and safe playground equipment and surfaces?
10. If students live beyond walking distance, is bus transportation provided? Do buses meet legal standards? How often are they inspected?
11. What are the qualifications for bus drivers? How often are they reviewed? Have there been bus accidents in the last three years that have resulted in injuries? Are student bus riders trained in emergency procedures? Are bus loading and unloading areas safe?
12. Are hot lunches available? How much do they cost? What percentage of students participate in the lunch program? What percentage go home for lunch? What percentage bring their lunch? Is there a sanitary and attractive lunchroom?
13. Since federal support has been cut, has the cost of lunches increased? How much? Has participation in the lunch program declined? Has the lunch program been eliminated?

Action suggestions: Conduct a study of school playground equipment and surface. Consider both safety and whether present equipment contributes to imaginative play. If federal cuts have adversely affected the school lunch program, explore ways that the PTA can help feed needy children. PTA members can volunteer to ride school buses to observe student conduct. They can check the neighborhood of the school for "attractive nuisances" and study local zoning ordinances regarding proximity of such establishments to schools. If necessary, consider recruiting volunteers as part-time school nurses. If there is no student accident insurance plan, work with school administrators to establish one.

School Financing (ask principal, superintendent, school board)

QUESTIONS	RESPONSES
1. How does your school district's budget reflect the community's educational priorities? Are programs adequately funded? Which programs or services do you believe need to receive more dollars? Which programs or services could receive fewer dollars?	
2. Has your local school board recently made, or is it currently considering, any major budget cuts? If so, in what areas? How will these cuts affect your school's educational program?	
3. If your school has to cut a program, what would be among the *first* programs or services you would suggest be cut? What would be the *last* programs or services you would suggest be cut?	
4. How have the federal government's budget cuts affected your school's program or services? Are cuts being made in bilingual education, in programs for the disadvantaged, handicapped, and gifted, or in child nutrition? How will proposed future cuts affect this school?	
5. How have your state government's budget cuts affected your school's program? Are any other state cuts planned?	
6. What is being done to replace money cut by federal and state governments?	
7. Are parents through the PTA actively involved in determining and passing tax levies and bond issues?	

Action suggestions: Since a school district's budget is a reflection of its community's educational priorities, get to know your school district's budget. Ask questions about expenditures and needs. Ask to study any needs assessment or priority study used in preparing the budget. Don't simply react to cuts already made by school district officials. Find out in advance whenever school district officials are contemplating budget cuts. Request to speak to the board in opposition to cuts you believe will be harmful. Be prepared to suggest areas where cuts could be better made before the cuts have been decided upon. If cuts are going to affect the school adversely, you may need to work for a tax levy to increase your operating budget.

In certain cases, the PTA can temporarily replace programs or services that have been cut. If cuts in the programs for disadvantaged students occur, offer tutoring services for these children. If your local school district cuts cultural arts programs, PTA volunteers can help fill the gap by providing music, art, and other instruction. As a general rule, however, the PTA should not be expected to provide funds or services that ought to come from the school district.

IX Parents and Community

In a good school, parents are involved in every phase of their children's education, and the local community supports the activities and goals of the school. Parents visit school often; confer with teachers; ask questions about their children's programs and problems; serve on advisory committees at the school; act as classroom, lunch, library, first-aid, or other kinds of volunteers; attend school board meetings; and keep informed about the day-to-day activities of the school. They work as a team with teachers to coordinate school and home learning. They take seriously their responsibility to support school rules and policies and to support the authority of teachers and other school personnel.

Parents and the entire community recognize the vital importance of education. They take pride in their school and in its students. Every day and in every way, parents and community support education in general and public education in particular. People—teachers, parents, administrators, other citizens—make a difference. They make a good school.

Parents and Community
(ask parents, teachers, school administrators)

QUESTIONS	RESPONSES
1. How are parents involved in their children's education in the school? What percentage of parents attend open houses? Teacher-parent conferences?	
2. How do parents and the community demonstrate their commitment to education? Do they work for full funding of educational programs and services? How do they make education one of the top priorities of the community?	

Questions	Responses

3. How do parents work with teachers and other school personnel to benefit the education and welfare of children? What else can parents and members of the general community do to improve education and the welfare of young people?
4. How willing are other segments of the community to work with the school and parents? What support does the school receive from business and industry? Labor unions? Senior citizens? People without children in the school? Service clubs? The local media?
5. Is the school PTA an active one? What percentage of parents belong? Teachers? What percentage are regularly involved in PTA projects and programs?
6. How can the PTA help the school? The teachers? Parents? Students? The community at large?

Action suggestions: Study ways to increase parental and community involvement in the school. Encourage parents to visit school often, not just for formal parent-teacher conferences. Plan open houses for the entire community, programs underscoring the importance of education in today's world, and community action projects. Work with local representatives of the media to help them understand and publicize the positive aspects of education. Encourage school administrators and personnel to ask parents and community for support, assistance, and advice. Bring parents, nonparents including senior citizens, students, and staff together at the school to discuss mutual concerns and to work together to solve these concerns. Invite all interested citizens to attend PTA meetings and to join the PTA members to work in and for the schools of America.

THE NEXT STEP

You have completed the first phase of the evaluation of your school—working through the checklist of questions and responses. Now congratulate yourselves, take a deep breath, and begin the next phase—analyzing the information you have just gathered.

You may wish to conduct the initial analysis with only those PTA members, school personnel, and students who participated in the survey. If so, set up a meeting with them to analyze the responses you received. Note any areas that need more information and go back to secure that information. Also, look for areas not covered or for additional people who need to be interviewed, and set up plans for filling in these gaps. Then compile the data in an easily readable form.

ANALYZING THE DATA

After the data are compiled and available for distribution, you will be ready to convene a larger group—including other PTA members, school administrators, teachers, students, and concerned citizens—to evaluate the information further and begin to draft a plan of action. You will find it particularly useful to analyze the answers to questions and other comments in light of the general statements of situations that exist in a good school (included at the beginning of each section). These statements should give you a reference against which to judge the strengths and weaknesses of these aspects of the school.

Look first at your school's strengths and list them in detail. Next, consider how good points of your school can be improved further. For example, if you have an excellent teaching staff, will more in-service training and a special system of rewarding excellent teachers make that staff even better? If you have a solid curriculum, will the addition of computer education make it even stronger and better able to prepare students for tomorrow's world? Take plenty of time to study the strengths because you will find that it is usually easier and more effective to build on already existing strengths than to concentrate only on weaknesses.

Next, turn to possible areas of weakness and list them as factually and non-emotionally as possible. For example, if discipline appears to be a problem, don't say "discipline is horrible," but rather something like "assaults on two students and seven acts of vandalism in the last year raise questions about the need for improved discipline."

Once weaknesses or deficiencies have been clearly identified, begin to plan how to overcome them. Get as many ideas as you can, then develop concrete procedures for improvement with details for implementation and achievable timelines. Be sure to enlist the support of those who have the authority to implement any changes—the school board, superintendent, principal, and teachers. Few suggestions for changes are likely to meet with success if important groups such as teachers, students, or administrators are alienated from the process.

Once you have support within the school, you may want to go public with the evaluation and plans for action. Community support—especially support from parents and students—is essential to effect any major changes. Be sure that you go public with the strengths of the school as well as with those areas that you think need improvement.

A LAST THOUGHT

When you have finished your analysis, drawn up plans for improvement, formed any necessary committees to work with school officials and oversee changes, and are ready to begin new improvement projects, take a few minutes to consider what you have learned. Most likely you now know that your school is a strong and effective educator of your children and of all the children in your community.

When you looked in on your school, you probably found that it was a much better school than you had previously believed. Problems undoubtedly were found, funds were short, some areas needed strengthening, but your analysis should confirm what the National PTA has learned over the past eight decades—our nation's public schools are good and getting better. That is why the National PTA believes that our public education system is basically sound and effective and needs to be improved, not replaced.

Experts say that one of the factors most responsible for improving or maintaining quality in our schools is parental and community involvement. By your very participation in this evaluation project, you have become more involved and thus have improved your school. Because of the vital role that education plays in our society, evaluating and improving schools is an important public responsibility. With your continued concern and involvement, your school will continue to serve the needs of today's young people and of generations of future Americans.

RESOURCES

Resources that may help you to look in on your school include:

An Agenda for Action: Recommendations for School Mathematics of the 1980s. National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, 1906 Association Drive, Reston, Virginia 22091. (Contact other curriculum organizations for similar information.)

Censorship in the Schools: What Is It? How Do You Cope? American Library Association, Office of Intellectual Freedom, 50 East Huron, Chicago, Illinois 60611.

Declining Enrollment—Closing Schools: Problems and Solutions. American Association of School Administrators, 1801 North Moore Street, Arlington, Virginia 22209.

Good Schools: What Makes Them Work. National School Public Relations Association, 1801 North Moore Street, Arlington, Virginia 22209.

Good Teachers: What to Look For. National School Public Relations Association, 1801 North Moore Street, Arlington, Virginia 22209.

Middle Grades Assessment Program, by Gayle Dorman. Center for Early Adolescence, School of Public Health, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Suite 223, Carr Mill Mall, Carrboro, North Carolina 27510. (In addition to this full-scale study, the center has two useful pamphlets available: *Curriculum and Instruction in Junior High and Middle School: What Parents Should Look For* and *School Environment for Young Adolescents: What Parents Should Look For*.)

The School Budget: It's Your Money; It's Your Business, by Rhoda Dersh, National Committee for Citizens in Education, Suite 410, Wilde Lake Village Green, Columbia, Maryland 21044.

School Closings and Declining Enrollment: A Guide to Effective Parent/Citizen Involvement. Educational Facilities Laboratories, Academy for Educational Development, 680 Fifth Avenue, New York, New York 10019.

School Discipline Package. National School Resource Network, 5530 Wisconsin Avenue, N.W., Suite 1600, Washington, D.C. 20015.

The Students' Right to Read and *The Students' Right to Know*. National Council of Teachers of English, 1111 Kenyon Road, Urbana, Illinois 61801.

What to Look For When You Visit Your Child's School. National Education Association, 1201 16th Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20031.

Your Child and Testing. National Institute of Education, Consumer Information Center, Department 520J, Pueblo, Colorado 81009.

PTA Today, the magazine of the National PTA, focuses on topics of interest to parents and educators seven times each year. The program section of each issue provides suggestions for other useful publications.

For additional resources, contact your teachers, administrators, or local school board members, your state PTA, your state department of education, and relevant state and national professional associations.

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